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*An Astounding
Complete Novel*
By **MANLY WADE
WELLMAN**



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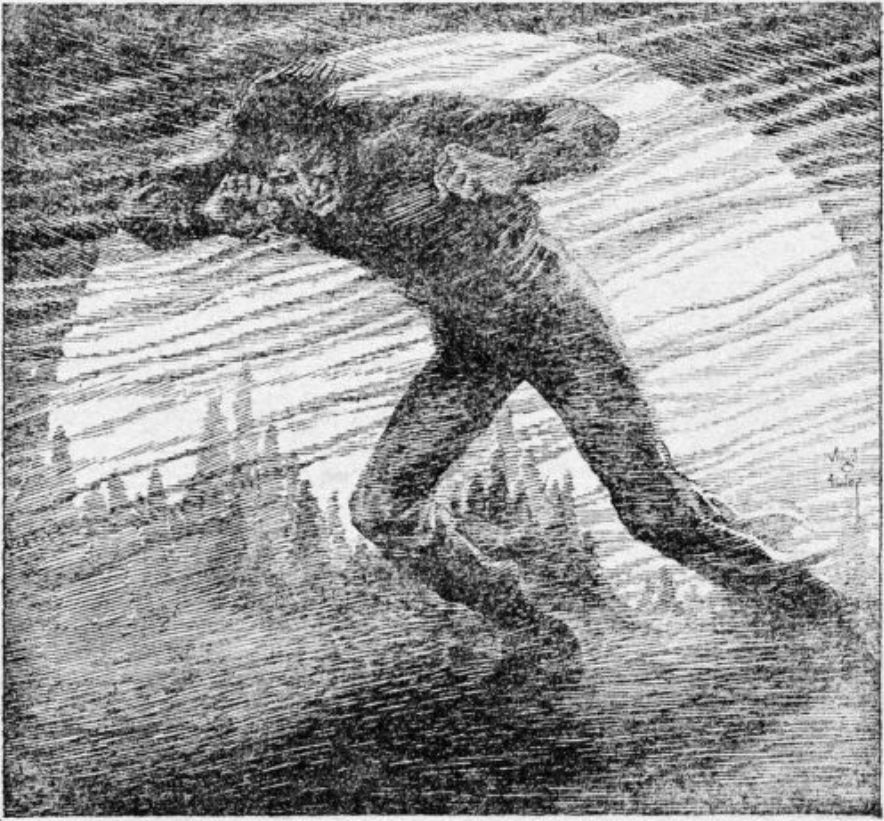
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The wind howled dismally out of the desolate waste and stabbed him through and through

WANDERER OF TIME

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross

First published *Startling Stories*, Summer 1944.

Blake Carson Rips Open the Veil of the Future—and What He Sees Therein Thrusts Him into a Bitter Quest for Vengeance!

Professor Hardwick once delivered a learned lecture to a group of earnest students.

“Time does not exist in actual fact,” Professor Hardwick had said. “It is simply the term science applies to a condition of space which it does not fully comprehend. We know that there has been a Past, and can prove it: we also know that there is a Future, but we cannot prove it. Therein lies the need for the term ‘Time,’ in order that an insurmountable difficulty may become resolved into common understanding.”

This excerpt from his paper—a pedantic observation without doubt—had prompted Blake Carson, spare-time dabbler in physics, to think further. Much further. He had heard Hardwick make that statement five years ago. Now Hardwick was dead, but every observation he had ever made, every treatise he had written, had been absorbed to the full by the young physicist. Between the ages of twenty-five and thirty he had plowed through the deeper works of Einstein, Eddington, and Jeans to boot.

“Time,” Blake Carson observed, to his little laboratory, when the five years had gone by, “definitely does not exist! It is a concept engendered by the limitations of a physical body. And a physical body, according to Eddington and Jeans, is the outward manifestation of thought itself. Change the thought and you change the body in like proportion. You believe you know the past. So adjust your mind to the situation and there is no reason why you shouldn’t know the future.”

Two years later he added an amendment.

“Time is a circle, in which thought itself and all its creations go in an everlasting cycle, repeating the process without end. Therefore, if we have in a remote past done the same things we are doing now, it is logical to assume that some hangover of memory may be left behind—a hangover from the past which, from the present standpoint, will be in the future, so far back is it in the time circle.

“The medium for thought is the brain. Therefore, any hangover must be in the brain. Find that, and you have the key to future time. All you will actually do will be to awake a memory of the remote past.”

From this conception there sprouted in Blake Carson’s laboratory a complicated mass of apparatus contrived from hard earned savings and erected in spare time. Again and again he built and rebuilt, tested and experimented, finally got assistance from two other young men with ideas similar to his own. They did not fully understand his theory but his enthusiasm certainly impressed them.

At last he had things exactly as he wanted them, summoned his two friends one Saturday evening and waved a hand to his apparatus.

Dick Glenbury was shock-haired, ruddy faced, and blue-eyed—a man of impulses, honesty, and dependable concentration. Hart Cranshaw was the exact opposite—sallow-skinned, always unruffled, black haired. A brilliant physicist, confirmed cynic, with only his great intelligence to save him from being a complete boor.

“Boys, I have it,” Blake Carson declared with enthusiasm, gray eyes gleaming. “You know my theory regarding the hangover. This”—he motioned to the apparatus—“is the Probe.”

“You don’t mean you intend to use all this stuff on your brain to probe for the right spot, do you?” Dick Glenbury demanded.

“That is the idea, yes.”

“When you’ve done this, what then?” Cranshaw asked, sticking to the practical side, as usual.

“Tell you better when I know something,” Carson grinned. “Right now I want you to follow out instructions.”

He seated himself in the chair immediately under the wilderness of odd looking lenses, lamps, and tubes. Following directions Glenbury busied himself with the switchboard. One projector gave forth a violet ray which enveloped Blake Carson’s head completely.

Opposite him, so he could see it clearly, a squared and numbered screen came into life and gave a perfect silhouette, X-ray wise, of his skull. It differed only from X-ray in that the convolutions of the brain were clearly shown with more vividity than any other part.

“There,” Carson gasped abruptly. “Look in Section Nine, Square Five. There’s a black oval mark—a blind spot. No registration at all. That is a hangover.”

He pressed a switch on the chair arm.

“Taking a photograph,” he explained. Then giving the order to cut off the entire apparatus, he got to his feet. Within a few minutes the self-developing tank produced a finished print. He handed it round in obvious delight.

“So what?” Cranshaw growled, his sallow face mystified. “Now you have got a blind spot what good does it do you? All this is way outside the physics I ever learned. You still can’t see the future.” This last was added with some impatience.

“But I shall.” Carson’s voice was tense. “You notice that that blind spot is exactly where we might expect it to be? In the subconscious area. To get a clear knowledge of what the spot contains there is only one method to use.”

“Yeah,” Glenbury said grimly. “A surgeon should link up the blank portion with the active portion of your brain by means of a nerve. And would that be a ticklish business?”

“I don’t need a surgeon,” Carson said. “Why a real nerve? A nerve is only a fleshly means of carrying minute electrical sensation. A small electric device can do it just as well. In other words an external mechanical nerve.”

He turned aside and brought forth an object not unlike a stethoscope. At both ends were suction caps and small dry batteries. Between the caps was a length of strong cable.

“A brain gives off minute electric charges—anybody knows that,” Carson resumed. “This mechanical device can accomplish the thing through the skull bone. Thereby the blind spot and normal brain area would be linked. At least that’s how I figure it.”

“Well, all right,” Dick Glenbury said, with an uneasy glance at Hart Cranshaw. “To me it sounds like a novel way of committing suicide.”

“Like suffocating in your own waste,” Cranshaw agreed.

“If you weren’t so fact-bound you’d see my point,” Blake snorted. “Anyway, I’m going to try it.”

Again he switched on his brain-reading equipment, studied the screen and the photograph for a moment, then he clamped one end of the artificial nerve device onto his skull. The other suction cup he moved indecisively about his head, positioning it by watching it on the screen. Time and again he fished round the blind spot, finally pressed the cap home.

A sensation of crawling sickness passed through him as though his body were being slowly turned inside out. His laboratory, the tense faces of Glenbury and Cranshaw misted mysteriously and were gone. Images as though reflected from disturbed water rippled through his brain.

An inchoate mass of impressions slammed suddenly into his consciousness. There were scurrying people superimposed on ragged cliffs, against which plunged foaming seas. From the cliffs there seemed to sprout the towers of an unknown, remote, incomparably beautiful city catching the light of an unseen sun.

Machines—people—mists. A thundering, grinding pain. . . .

He opened his eyes suddenly to find himself sprawled on the laboratory floor with brandy scorching his throat.

“Of all the darned, tomfool experiments,” Dick Glenbury exploded. “You went out like a light after the first few minutes.”

“I told you it was no use,” Cranshaw snorted. “The laws of physics are against this kind of thing. Time is locked up—”

“No, Hart, it isn’t.” Carson stirred on the floor and rubbed his aching head. “Definitely it isn’t,” he insisted.

Getting to his feet he stared before him dreamily.

“I saw the future!” he whispered. “It wasn’t anything clear—but it must have been the future. There was a city such as we have never imagined. Everything was cross sectioned, like a montage. The reason for that was my own inaccuracy with the artificial nerve. Next time I’ll do better.”

“Next time,” Cranshaw echoed. “You’re going on with this risk? It might even kill you before you’re through.”

“Perhaps,” Carson admitted, in a quiet voice. He shrugged. “Pioneers have often paid dearly for their discoveries. But I have a key. I’m going on, boys, until it swings wide open.”

For months afterwards Blake Carson became absorbed in his experiments. He gave up his ordinary work, lived on what savings he had and went tooth and nail after his discovery.

At first he was elated by the precision and accuracy with which he could achieve results. Then as days passed both Hart Cranshaw and Dick Glenbury noticed that an odd change had come over him, for he seemed morose, afraid of letting some statement or other escape him.

“What is it, Blake?” Dick Glenbury insisted one evening, when he had arrived for the latest report on progress. “You’re different. Something is on your mind. You can surely tell me, your best friend.”

As Blake Carson smiled, Glenbury suddenly noticed how tired he looked.

“Which doesn’t include Hart, eh?” Carson asked.

“I didn’t mean that exactly. But he is a bit cold blooded when it comes to truths. What’s wrong?”

"I have discovered when I am to die," Blake Carson said soberly.

"So what? We all die sometime." Dick Glenbury stopped uneasily. There was a strange look on Blake Carson's worn face.

"Yes, we all die sometime, of course, but I shall go one month hence. On April fourteenth. And I shall die in the electric chair for first degree murder."

Dick Glenbury stared, appalled. "What! You, a murderer? Why, it's utterly—say, that artificial nerve has gone cockeyed."

"I'm afraid not, Dick," answered Carson. "I realize now, that death ends this particular phase of existence on this plane. The views of the future which I have seen refer to some other plane ways beyond this, the plane where successive deaths would ultimately carry me. With death, all association with things here is broken."

"I still don't believe murder is ahead of you," Dick Glenbury said.

"None the less I shall die as a convicted murderer," Carson went on, his voice harsh. "The man who gets me into this approaching mess and who will have the perfect alibi is—Hart Cranshaw."

"Hart? You mean he is going to commit a murder deliberately and blame you for it?"

"Without doubt. We know already that he is interested now in this invention of mine; we know too that he realizes he has a blind spot in his brain, just as everybody else has. Hart, cold blooded and calculating, sees the value of this invention to gain power and control for himself. Stock markets, gambling speculations, history before it appears. He could even rule the world. He will steal the secret from me and rid himself of the only two men in the world who know of his villainy."

"The only two men?" repeated Glenbury. "You mean I, also, will be slain?"

"Yes." Blake Carson's voice had a far away sound.

"But this can't happen," Glenbury shouted huskily. "I'm not going to—to be murdered just to further the aims of Hart Cranshaw. Like blazes I am. You forget, Blake—forewarned is forearmed. We can defeat this." His voice became eager. "Now that we know about it, we can take steps to block him."

"No," Carson interrupted. "I've had many weeks to think this over, Dick—weeks that have nearly driven me mad as I realized the truth. The law of time is inexorable. It must happen! Don't you even yet realise that all I have seen is only an infinitely remote memory from a past time, over which moments we are passing again? All this has happened before. You will be murdered as surely as I knew you would come here tonight, and I shall die convicted of that murder."

Dick Glenbury's face had gone the color of putty. "When does it happen?"

"At exactly nine minutes after eleven tonight—here." Carson paused and gripped Glenbury's shoulders tightly. "Stars above, Dick, can't you realise how all this hurts me, how frightful it is for me to have to tell it all to you. It's only because I know you're a hundred percent that I spoke at all."

"Yes—I know." Glenbury sank weakly into a chair. For a moment or two his mind wandered. Next he found that his frozen gaze was fixed on the electric clock. It was exactly forty minutes past ten.

"At ten to eleven—in ten minutes, that is—Hart will come here," Carson resumed. "His first words will be—'Sorry I'm late, boys, but I got held up at an Extraordinary Board Meeting.' An argument will follow, then murder. Everything is clear up to the moment of my

death. After that Hart is extinguished from my future. The vision of life continuing in a plane different from this one is something I have pondered pretty deeply.”

Dick Glenbury did not speak, but Carson went on, musing aloud.

“Suppose,” Carson said, “I were to try an experiment with time? Suppose, because I possess knowledge no man has ever had so far—I were able to upset the order of the Circle. Suppose, I came back, after I have been electrocuted, to confront Hart with your murder and my wrongful execution?”

“How,” Glenbury’s mind was too lethargic to take things in.

“I’ve already told you that the body obeys the mind. Normally, at my death, I shall recreate my body in a plane removed from this one. But suppose my thoughts upon the moment of death are entirely concentrated on returning to this plane at a date one week after execution? That would be April twenty-first. I believe I might thereby return to confront Hart.”

“Do you know you can do this?”

“No; but it seems logical to assume that I can. Since the future, after death, is on another plane, I cannot tell whether my plan would work or not. As I have told you, Hart ceases to be in my future time from the moment I die, unless I can change the course of Time and thereby do something unique. I guess I—”

Carson broke off as the door opened suddenly and Hart Cranshaw came in. He threw down his hat casually.

“Sorry I’m late, boys, but I got held up at an Extraordinary Board Meeting—” He broke off. “What’s wrong, Dick? Feeling faint?”

Dick Glenbury did not answer. He was staring at the clock. It was exactly ten minutes to eleven.

“He’s okay,” Blake Carson said quietly, turning. “Just had a bit of a shock, that’s all. I’ve been taking a look into the future, Hart, and I’ve discovered plenty that isn’t exactly agreeable.”

“Oh?” Hart Cranshaw looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on, “Matter of fact, Blake, it strikes me that I’ve been none too cordial towards you considering the brilliance of the thing you have achieved. I’d like to know plenty more about this invention if you’d tell me.”

“Yes, so you can steal it!” Dick Glenbury shouted suddenly, leaping to his feet. “That’s your intention. The future has shown that to Blake already. And you’ll try and kill me in the doing. But you’re not going to. By heavens, no! So Time can’t be cheated, Blake? We’ll see about that.”

He raced for the door, but he did not reach it. Hart Cranshaw caught him by the arm and swung him back.

“What the devil are you raving about?” he snapped. “Do you mean to say I intend to murder you?”

“That is why you came here, Hart,” Carson declared quietly. “Time doesn’t lie, and all your bluster and pretended innocence makes not the least difference to your real intentions. You figure to do plenty with this invention of mine.”

“All right, supposing I do?” Hart Cranshaw snapped, suddenly whipping an automatic from his pocket. “What are you going to do about it?”

Blake Carson shrugged. “Only what immutable law makes me do!”

“To blazes with this!” Dick Glenbury shouted suddenly. “I’m not standing here obeying immutable laws—not when my life’s in danger. Hart, drop that gun!”

Hart Cranshaw only grinned frozenly. In desperation Glenbury dived for him, caught his foot in a snaking cable on the floor and collided with the physicist. Whether it was accident or design Blake Carson could not be sure at the moment, but the automatic certainly exploded.

Hart Cranshaw stood in momentary silence as Dick Glenbury slid gently to the floor and lay still. Blake Carson’s eyes shifted to the clock—eleven-nine!

At length Hart Cranshaw seemed to recover himself. He held his automatic more firmly.

“Okay, Blake, you know the future, so you may as well know the rest—”

“I do,” Blake Carson interrupted him. “You are going to pin this thing on me. You shot Dick deliberately.”

“Not deliberately: it was an accident. It just happened to come sooner than I’d figured, that’s all. With both of you out of the way what is to prevent me becoming even the master of the whole world with this gadget of yours? Nothing!” Hart Cranshaw gave a grim smile. “I planned it all out, Blake. For tonight I have a cast iron alibi. It will be your task to prove yourself innocent of Dick Glenbury’s murder.”

“I won’t succeed: I know that already.”

Hart Cranshaw eyed him queerly. “Considering what I have done—and what I am going to do—you’re taking it mightly calmly.”

“Why not? Knowledge of the future makes one know what is inescapable—for both of us.” Blake Carson spoke the last words significantly.

“I’ve checked on my future already and I know darn well I’m in for a good time,” Hart Cranshaw retorted. He pondered for a moment then motioned with his gun. “I’m taking no chances on you wrecking this machinery, Blake. I’d shoot you first and alibi myself out of it afterwards, only I don’t want things to get too complicated. Grab the ’phone and call the police. Confess to them what you have done.”

With resigned calm Blake Carson obeyed. When he was through Hart Cranshaw nodded complacently.

“Good. Before the police arrive I’ll be gone, leaving you this gun to explain away. Since I have kept my gloves on it puts me in the clear for fingerprints even though there won’t be any of yours about. Just the same only you and Dick have been here together tonight. I have been elsewhere. I can prove it.”

Blake Carson smiled grimly. “Then later you will pose as my sympathetic friend, will offer to look after my work while I am in custody, and save yourself by good lawyers and your cast-iron alibi. That’s clever, Hart. But remember, to everything there is an appointed time!”

“Right now,” Hart Cranshaw answered in his conceited assured tones, “the future looks quite rosy so far as I am concerned . . .”

Inevitably the law enacted every incident Blake Carson had already foreseen. Once in the hands of the police, cross-examined relentlessly, he saw all his chances of escape vanish. Carson was convicted of first degree murder, and the Court pronounced the death sentence. The trial had proceeded in record time, as the murder was considered flagrant, and newspapers denounced Carson bitterly. To the horror of Carson’s lawyer, he refused to take an appeal or resort to the usual methods of delay. Carson’s attitude was fatalistic, and he could not be moved in his seeming determination to die.

In his cell Blake spent most of his time between sentence and execution brooding over the facts he had gleaned from his experiments. In the death house in prison he was certainly a model prisoner, quiet, preoccupied, just a little grim. His whole being was as a matter of fact built up into one fierce, unwavering concentration—the date of April twenty-first. Upon his mastery of elemental forces at the point of death depended his one chance of changing the law of time and confronting Hart Cranshaw with the impossible, a return from death.

Not a word of his intentions escaped him. He was unbowed on the last morning, listened to the prison chaplain’s brief words of solace in stony silence, then walked the short length of dim corridor, between guards, to the fatal chamber. He sat down in the death chair with the calm of a man about to preside over a meeting.

The buckles on the straps clinked a little, disturbing him.

He hardly realised what was going on in the somber, dimly lighted place. If his mental concentration concerning April twenty-first had been strong before, now it had become fanatical. Rigid, perspiration streaming down his face with the urgency of his thoughts, he waited. . .

He felt it then—the thrilling, binding, racking current as it nipped his vitals, then spread and spread into an infinite snapping anguish in which the world and the universe was a brief blazing hell of dissolution. . . .

Then things were quiet—oddly quiet. . . .

He felt as though he were drifting in a sea without substance—floating alone. His concentration was superseded now by a dawning wonder, indeed a striving to come to grips with the weird situation in which he found himself.

He had died—his body had—he was convinced of that. But now, to break these iron bands of paralysis, that was the need!

He essayed a sudden effort and with it everything seemed to come abruptly into focus. He felt himself snap out of the void of in-between into normal—or at least mundane—surroundings. He stirred slowly. He was still alone, lying on his back on a somber, chilly plain of reddish dust. It occasioned him passing surprise that he was still dressed in the thin cotton shirt and pants of a prisoner.

A biting chill in the air went suddenly to his marrow. He shuddered as he got to his feet and looked down at himself.

“Of course. I held my clothes in thought as much as my body, so they were bound to be recreated also. . . .”

Baffled, he stared about him. Overhead the sky was violet blue and powdered with endless hosts of stars. To the right was a frowning ridge of higher ground. And everywhere, red soil. Time—an infinitely long span—had passed.

With a half cry he turned and ran breathlessly towards the ridge, scrambled up the rubbly slope quickly. At the top he paused, appalled.

A red sun, swollen to unheard-of size, was bisected by the far distant jagged horizon—a sun to whose edge the stars themselves seemed to reach. He was old now, unguessably old, his incandescent fires burned out.

“Millions of years, quintillions of years,” Blake Carson whispered, sitting down with a thump on an upturned rock and staring out over the drear, somber vastness. “In heaven’s name, what have I done? What have I done?”

He stared in front of him, forced himself by superhuman effort to think calmly. He had planned for one week beyond death. Instead he had landed here, at the virtual end of Earth's existence, where age was stamped on everything. It was in the scarcely moving sun which spoke of Earth's near-standstill from tidal drag. It was in the red soil, the ferrous oxide of extreme senility, the rusting of the metallic deposits in the ground itself. It was in the thin air which had turned the atmospheric heights violet-blue and made breathing a sheer agony.

And there was something else too apart from all this which Blake Carson had only just begun to realise. He could no longer see the future.

"I cheated the normal course of after-death," he mused. "I did not move to a neighboring plane there to resume a continuation of life, and neither did I move to April twenty-one as I should have done. It can only mean that at the last minute there was an unpredictable error. It is possible that the electricity from the chair upset my brain planning and shifted the focus of my thoughts so that I was hurled ahead, not one week—but to here. And with that mishap I also lost the power to visualize the future. Had I died by any other way but electricity there might not have been that mistake."

He shuddered again as a thin, ice-charged wind howled dismally out of the desolate waste and stabbed him through and through. Stung into movements, once more, he got up. Protecting his face from the brief, slashing hurricane he moved further along the ridge and gazed out over the landscape from a different vantage. And from here there was a new view. Ruins, apparently.

He began to run to keep himself warm, until the thin air flogged his lung to bursting point. At a jog trot he moved on towards the mighty, hardly moving sun, stopped at last within the shadow of a vast, eroded hall.

It was red like everything else. Within it were the ponderous remains of dust-smothered machinery, colossi of power long disused and forgotten. He stared at them, unable to fathom their smallest meaning. His gaze traveled further—to the crumbled ruins of mighty edifices of rusting metal in the rear. Terrace upon terrace, to the violet sky. Here it seemed was a rusting monument to Man's vanished greatness, with the inexplicable and massive engines as the secret of his power . . .

And Man himself? Gone to other worlds? Dead in the red dust? Blake Carson shook himself fiercely at the inescapable conviction of total loneliness. Only the stars, the sun, and the wind—that awful wind, moaning now softly through the ruins, sweeping the distant corner of the horizon into a mighty cloud that blacked out the brazen glitter of the northern stars.

Blake Carson turned at last. At the far end of the ruins his eye had caught a faint gleam of reflection from the crimson sun. It shone like a diamond. Baffled, he turned and hurried towards it, found the distance was deceptive and that it was nearly two miles off. The nearer he came the more the brightness resolved itself into one of six massively thick glass domes some six feet in diameter.

In all there were eight of them dotted about a little plateau which had been scraped mainly free of rubble and stone. It resembled the floor of a crater with frowning walls of rock all round it. Mystified, Carson moved to the nearest dome and peered through.

In that moment he forgot the melancholy wind and his sense of desperate loneliness—for below was life! Teeming life! Not human life, admittedly, but at least something that moved. It took him a little while to adjust himself to the amazing thing he had discovered.

Perhaps two hundred feet below the dome, brightly lighted, was a city in miniature. It reminded him of a model city of the future he had once seen at an exposition. There were terraces, pedestrian tracks, towers, even aircraft. It was all there on an infinitely minute scale, and probably spread far under the earth out of his line of vision.

But the teeming hordes were—ants. Myriads of them. Not rushing about with the apparent aimlessness of his own time, but moving with a definable, ordered purpose. Ants in a dying world? Ants with their own city?

“Of course,” he whispered, and his breath froze the glass. “Of course. The law of evolution—man to ant, and ant to bacteria. Science has always visualized that. This I could never have known about for the future I saw was not on this plane . . .”

And Hart Cranshaw? The scheme of vengeance? It seemed a remote plan now. Down here was company—intelligent ants who, whatever they might think of him, would perhaps at least talk to him, help him . . .

Suddenly he beat his fists mightily on the glass, shouted hoarsely.

There was no immediate effect. He beat again, this time frenziedly, and the scurrying hordes below suddenly paused in their movement as though uncertain. Then they started to scatter madly like bits of dust blown by the wind.

“Open up!” he shouted. “Open up. I’m freezing.”

He was not quite sure what happened then, but it seemed to him that he went a little mad. He had a confused, blurred notion of running to each dome in turn and battering his fists against its smooth, implacable surface.

Wind, an endless wind, had turned his blood to ice. At last he sank down on an outjutting rock at the plateau edge, buried his head in his hands and shivered. An overpowering desire to go to sleep was upon him, but presently it passed as he became aware of new thoughts surging through his brain, mighty thoughts that were not his own.

He saw, in queer kaleidoscopic fashion, the ascent of man to supreme heights: he saw too man’s gradual realization that he was upon a doomed world. He saw the thinning of the multitudes and the survival of the fittest—the slow, inexorable work of Nature as she adapted life to suit her latest need.

Like a panorama of the ages, hurdling great vistas of time, Blake Carson saw the human body change into that of the termite, of which the termite of his own time was but the progenitor, the experimental form, as it were. The termites, invested with more than human intelligence, had formed these underground cities themselves, cities replete with every scientific need and requiring but little of the dying Earth so small were they. Only underground was there safety from the dying atmosphere.

Yes, Nature had been clever in her organization and would be even cleverer when it came to the last mutation into bacteria. Indestructible bacteria which could live in space, float to other worlds, to begin anew. The eternal cycle.

Carson looked up suddenly, puzzled as to why he should know all these things. At what he beheld he sprang to his feet, only to sit down again as he found his legs were numbed with cold.

There was a small army of ants quite close to him, like a black mat on the smooth red of the ground. Thought transference! That was how he had known. The truth had been forced into his mind deliberately. He realised it clearly now for there came a bombardment of mental questions, but from such a multitude of minds that they failed to make any sense.

“Shelter,” he cried. “Food and warmth—that is what I want. I have come out of Time—a wanderer—and it was an accident that brought me here. You will regard me as an ancient type, therefore I am surely useful to you. If I stay out here the cold will soon kill me.”

“You created your own accident, Blake Carson,” came one clear wave of thought. “Had you died as the Time-law proclaimed you would have passed on to the next stage of existence, the stage apart from this one. You chose instead to try and defeat Time in order that you might enact vengeance. We, who understand Time, Space, and Life, see what your intentions were.

“You cannot have help now. It is the law of the cosmos that you must live and die by its dictates. And death such as you will experience this time will not be the normal transition from this plane to another but transition to a plane we cannot even visualise. You have forever warped the cosmic line of Time you were intended to pursue. You can never correct that warp.”

Blake Carson stared, wishing he could shift his icebound limbs. He was dying even now, realised it clearly, but interest kept his mentality still alert.

“Is this hospitality?” he whispered. “Is this the scientific benevolence of an advanced age? How can you be so pitiless when you know why I sought revenge?”

“We know why, certainly, but it is trivial compared to your infinite transgression in trying to twist scientific law to your own ends. Offense against science is unforgivable, no matter what the motive. You are a throwback, Blake Carson—an outsider! Especially so to us. You never found Hart Cranshaw, the man you wanted. You never will.”

Blake Carson’s eyes narrowed suddenly. He noticed that as the thoughts reached him the body of ants had receded quite a distance, evidently giving up interest in him and returning to their domain. But the power of the thoughts reaching him did not diminish.

Abruptly he saw the reason for it. One termite, larger than the others, was alone on the red soil. Carson gazed at it with smoldering eyes, the innermost thoughts of the tiny thing probing his brain.

“I understand,” he whispered. “Yes. I understand! Your thoughts are being bared to me. You are Hart Cranshaw. You are the Hart Cranshaw of this age. You gained your end. You stole my invention—yes, became the master of science, the lord of the Earth, just as you had planned. You found that there was a way to keep on the normal plane after each death, a way entirely successful if death did not come by electrocution. That was what shattered my plan—the electric chair.

“But you went on and on, dying and being born again with a different and yet identical body. An eternal man, mastering more and more each time!” Carson’s voice had risen to a shriek. Then he calmed. “Until at last Nature changed you into an ant, made you the master of even the termite community. How little did I guess that my discovery would hand you the world. But if I have broken cosmic law, Hart Cranshaw, so have you. You have cheated your normal time action, time and again, with numberless deaths. You have stayed on this plane when you should have moved on to others. Both of us are transgressors. For you, as for me, death this time will mean the unknown.”

A power that was something other than himself gave Blake Carson strength at that moment. Life surged back into his leaden limbs and he staggered to his feet.

“We have come together again, Hart, after all these quintillions of years. Remember what I said long ago? To everything there is an appointed time? Now I know why you don’t want to save me.”

He broke off as with sudden and fantastic speed the lone termite sped back towards the mass of his departing colleagues. Once among them, as Carson well knew, there would be no means of identification.

With this realisation he forced himself into action and leaped. The movement was the last he could essay. He dropped on his face, and his hand closed round the scurrying insect. It escaped. He watched it run over the back of his hand—then frantically across his palm as he opened his fingers gently.

He had no idea how long he lay watching it—but at last it ran to the tip of his thumb. His first finger closed on his thumb suddenly—and crushed.

He found himself gazing at a black smear on thumb and finger.

He could move his hand no further. Paralysis had gripped his limbs completely. There was a deepening, crushing pain in his heart. Vision grew dim. He felt himself slipping—

But with the transition to Beyond he began to realise something else. He had not cheated Time! Neither had Hart Cranshaw! They had done all this before somewheres—would do it again—endlessly, so long as Time itself should exist. Death—transition—rebirth—evolution—back again to the age of the amoeba—upwards to man—the laboratory—the electric chair. . . .

Eternal. Immutable!

[The end of *Wanderer of Time* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]